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The press and the repeal of national prohibition

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Abstract: In early 1929, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst changed his mind over one of the era's controversial issues - Prohibition 1. Progressive Prohibitionists such as Hearst had believed that the "dry law" would be an adequate measure to uplift the country. But by January 1929, Hearst was conceding that Americans could actually not be forced to drink (just) water. In demanding an end to the "noble experiment", Hearst intensified the dynamic which led to the rapidly eroding acceptance of Prohibition, which just years before had enjoyed widespread support. Soon afterwards, numerous newspapers pointed out that "public opinion" had shifted and that a "wet tide", "wet groundswell", or "wet sentiment" was sweeping the country².

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Linards Udriis

The Press and the Repeal of National Prohibition

“You can lead the American people to water
but you cannot MAKE them drink.”

William Randolph Hearst,
Chicago Herald and Examiner,
January 4, 1929

In early 1929, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst changed his mind over one of the era's controversial issues – Prohibition¹. Progressive Prohibitionists such as Hearst had believed that the “dry law” would be an adequate measure to uplift the country. But by January 1929, Hearst was conceding that Americans could actually not be forced to drink (just) water. In demanding an end to the “noble experiment”, Hearst intensified the dynamic which led to the rapidly eroding acceptance of Prohibition, which just years before had enjoyed widespread support. Soon afterwards, numerous newspapers pointed out that “public opinion” had shifted and that a “wet tide”, “wet groundswell”, or “wet sentiment” was sweeping the country².

In hindsight, it seems clear that Prohibition simply had to fail: Enforcement turned out to be impossible in most areas of the United States. The promise that a ban on drinking would make America a safer, more prosperous place was broken. However, two points are worth reiterating. First, the broken promises of Prohibition had to be defined as a problem with political consequences. The corruption within the Harding administration, most notably the “Teapot dome” scandal, was a breach with Republicans' promise of a return to “normalcy” – but citizens kept voting for the party throughout the decade. Second, even if more and more Americans did become disenchanted with Prohibition, this by itself would not decide Prohibition's fate. Contemporaries on both sides of the issue – the “wets” and

¹ This paper draws on my master's thesis written at the University of Zurich in 2004, *Linards Udriis, Die steigende Flut der Prohibitionsskritik: Die Abschaffung der Prohibition in der massenmedialen Öffentlichkeit in den USA, 1924 bis 1933* [The rising tide of Prohibition criticism: the repeal of Prohibition in the mass media public sphere of the United States, 1924–1933] (University of Zurich 2004).

² See, for instance, the cartoons: The optimists, *New York Times*, February 1, 1931 (cf. also Illustration 1 later in this chapter), or: He little knows what's coming, *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, October 3, 1930.

the "drys" – would have considered repeal of a constitutional amendment to be unthinkable. As Texas senator Morris Sheppard famously remarked, repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment was "as likely as it would be for a humming bird to fly to the Mars with the Washington Monument attached to its tail". Critics of Prohibition, then, first had to realize that repeal was a viable option, and they had to find ways to make this strategy work in the political process as well.

Prohibition not only had to become a dominant political issue, but it also had to be transformed from a "frozen", stalemate-like conflict between the wets and the drys. All arguments on both sides had already (and tirelessly) been exchanged throughout the decade, as contemporary compilations attest.³ Scholars have available copious examples of every type of argument made at any given time during Prohibition.⁴ The important challenge facing wets as well as drys by the end of the 1920s, in the words of journalist and social critic Charles F. Merz, was "a reconciliation of conflicting views and a bold effort to overcome inertia".⁵ That is, the stalemate needed to be broken, transforming the endless quarrel into a dynamic conflict where people would revise their opinions and come to believe that there was a better way of dealing with alcohol.

To examine the dynamics of this conflict and identify which of the (old) arguments actually gained ground at the expense of others, this chapter looks at a systematic sample of the press. Despite growing competition from radio broadcasting, in the 1920s the press still reached the most citizens and did the most to shape the public sphere. The press played a crucial role as an arena for the definition of political problems and the discussion of solutions. It was a platform for groups struggling over the salience and relevance of issues and the best way to deal with them. If one uses newspapers as a source, however, it is important to treat them not as mere "mirrors" that reflected the ideas and activities of interests within society over issues such as Prohibition. One should also take into account the logic by which the press worked and thus newspapers' more active role in political processes, for example the way newspaper editors and publishers decided which news to emphasize and how events should be interpreted and portrayed. In this sense, it becomes necessary to analyze the call for repeal of Prohibition not only *in* the press but also *by* the press.

To this end, I have taken a systematic sample of newspapers that represents not only certain regions and conflicting camps but also varying types of newspapers (which addressed different socio-economic groups within society). The sample ranges from papers oriented more toward "serious" reporting and papers that were more sensationalist in character. Using this sample, I will consider how the stances of different newspapers evolved over the Prohibition years, with an eye on

which dimensions of the issue gained attention and which interests and individuals found forums for their views in which publications. My analysis, first concentrating on the importance of Prohibition in the coverage of presidential elections, suggests that not until the campaign of wet Democrat Al Smith in 1928 did Prohibition become a divisive and decisive issue in presidential campaigns, arguably contributing to the realignment of political parties.⁶ To complement this analysis of high-intensity political campaigns, I also offer an analysis of more routine periods outside of presidential elections (e.g. January 1924, 1928, 1929, 1931) and review when Prohibition seemed to become a major issue and what triggered this. Finally, the essay also focuses on possible mechanisms that might explain a substantial shift in public acceptance of Prohibition: the about-face of the Hearst press in early 1929 and the ensuing rapid and intense polarization and radicalization of discourse that seriously undermined Prohibition's appeal and the reputation of those who were still supporting it. Within a short time in 1929, disenchament with President Herbert Hoover's stance became evident, along with sinking trust in the administration on the issue. Wets also exhibited a new understanding that something could in fact be done against Prohibition. Even before the crash of the stock market and the advent of the Great Depression, therefore, Prohibition suffered a severe, eventually fatal blow. Even more than that, Prohibition appeared a major factor – alongside the Depression – in creating a social and political crisis at the end of the 1920s. The call for repeal of Prohibition in the press and by the press served, even if only symbolically, as an important way to overcome this crisis.

1. The press in the interwar years

During the interwar years, the press underwent structural transformations and developed new techniques for assessing and presenting political news. These trends help to explain why Prohibition received so much attention and why the dynamics in this debate shifted. During the 1920s and 1930s, the "new structural transformation of the public sphere" that had gained momentum in the Progressive Era continued to reshape the way newspapers operated.⁷ For a variety of rea-

⁶ For this argument, cf. *Thomas Welschopp*, *Das Phantom der öffentlichen Meinung. Massenmedien und die Verschiebung des Parteiensystems in den USA der 1920er Jahre* [The phantom of public opinion. Mass media and the realignment of the party system in the US in the 1920s], in: *Ute Daniel, et al.*, *Politische Kultur und Medienwirklichkeiten in den 1920er Jahren* [Political culture and media realities in the 1920s] (Bielefeld 2010). Cf. also *Michael Lerner*, *Dry Manhattan. Prohibition in New York City* (Cambridge, Mass. 2007).

⁷ *Andreas Koller*, *Der Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit in Westeuropa und den USA: Theoretische, metatheoretische und empirische Rekonstruktion und transatlantische Integration der Klassiker* [The structural transformation of the public sphere in Western Europe and the United States. Theoretical, metatheoretical and empirical reconstruction and trans-

³ See, for instance, the compilation of pro- and con-arguments in the foreword of *Lamar T. Beman*, *Selected Articles on Prohibition: Modification of the Volstead Act* (New York 1924).

⁴ For this point, cf. *Joseph R. Gusfield*, *Prohibition: The impact of political utopianism, in: John Baerman, Robert H. Bremner, David Brody*, *Change and continuity in twentieth-century America: The 1920's* (Columbus, Ohio 1968) 257–308.

⁵ *Charles Merz*, *The Dry Decade* (Garden City, New York 1932 [1930]) 284.

sons, some organizational and commercial and some ideological and political, newspapers began loosening their long-standing ties to political parties and organizations.⁸ Publishers' increasing success at detaching their operations from party control resulted in an independent press that followed its own logic and notions of the public good, but also in a more commercialized press. The structural transformation of the press had many manifestations, including the rapid success of tabloids by the 1920s, press concentration through chains and conglomerates, and the growing importance of news agencies and press services (e.g. of the *New York Times*), on which more and more newspaper outlets came to rely in order to keep up with the faster flow of news.⁹ Geographically, increasing newspaper circulation and the spread of news agencies and press services from the big cities brought small towns and rural areas into the metropolitan information network. By doubling their circulation alone between 1925 and 1930, city papers increasingly managed to set a national agenda and undermine the isolation of rural areas, as well as their conceptions of city life.¹⁰ This also meant diffusion of those topics, problems, and ideas that papers from the East Coast and Chicago deemed important – the (non-)enforcement of Prohibition being a major example – to various regions of the country. Issues seemed increasingly to converge nationwide, as more and more Americans were reading intertwined print media.¹¹

In terms of the actual production of news, growing media autonomy from the political system developed in tandem with new professional standards and role models among journalists, who conceived of themselves as actively and independently trying to shape the political agenda. Beyond their detailed reporting and analysis of Prohibition, newspapers shaped public opinion through innovative polling techniques, such as initiating straw polls and commenting at length on the

results.¹² Different types of newspapers followed different forms of logic in selecting and presenting news about politics and all other matters.¹³ More respectable newspapers adhered to a "public logic"; they closely followed politics but presenting it in a nonpartisan and balanced way, according to new, professional "canons of journalism."¹⁴ When an issue was as contested as Prohibition, the non-partisan stance of the press increased the chances that different interests and perspectives would receive attention, because journalists would look for a supporting and an opposing viewpoint to give a story an aura of objectivity. This would help critics of Prohibition once they started to organize themselves on a more intense basis in the second half of the 1920s.

With the disengagement of the press from political control and its growing commercialization, newspapers increasingly tried to attract their less stable readership with news that promised to be, above all, interesting. All newspapers, even the most genteel, did this, but the trend was especially manifest among tabloids and mass-marketed chain papers. Such papers unabashedly directed themselves to consumer audiences rather than citizen audiences. This media logic, which had roots in the mid-nineteenth century, favored scandals, crime, conflicts, and personalities over long and complex political processes. The most lurid or melodramatic aspects of Prohibition fit nicely into sensationalist press strategies. Stern Prohibition officers clashing with a festive crowd during their notorious raids, euphoric teenagers crashing cars while driving under the influence of illegal liquor, publicly dry politicians turning out to secretly drink at home, or dry evangelicals preaching decent behavior turning out to having broken norms themselves (e.g. adultery, speculation, etc.) – all this, and a lot more, made for excellent, exciting stories. As Charles F. Merz, an editor of the *World* and later the *New*

atlantic integration of the classics] (Dissertation University of Zurich 2004); *Richard L. Kaplan*, *Politics and the American press: the rise of objectivity, 1865–1920* (Cambridge 2002).

⁸ Several studies date the structural transformation of the public sphere in the first half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the (commercial) penny press: e.g. *Gerald Baldasty*, *The commercialization of news in the nineteenth century* (Madison 1992) or *W. David Sloan*, *Party press*, in: *Margaret A. Blanchard*, *History of the mass media in the United States: an encyclopedia* (Chicago, London 1998) 496–498. But commercialization did not yet mean depoliticization. Crises and political factors still played a role. In the second half of the nineteenth century, an economic strategy of a newspaper in a lot of cases led to an even closer link to a political party, as it was also commercially attractive to distinguish itself politically from competitors (e.g. *Kaplan*, *Politics and the American Press* 4–16).

⁹ The *United Press Associations*, known for its sensationalist reporting style, and the more staid *Associated Press* together provided articles to 2,400 members; *Hearst's International News Service* was growing as well. Cf. *Richard A. Schwarzlose*, *Cooperative news gathering*, in: *W. David Sloan*, *Lisa Mulliken Parrell*, *American Journalism: History, Principles, Practices* (Jefferson, N.C., London 2002) 153–162, here 159. Also *Walter Lippmann*, *Public Opinion* (New York 1997 [1922]) 205–206.

¹⁰ *Sean Dennis Cashman*, *Prohibition: the Lie of the Land* (New York 1981) 165.

¹¹ *Sally F. Griffith*, *Mass media come to the small town: the Emporia Gazette in the 1920s*, in: *Catherine L. Covert*, *John D. Stevens*, *Mass media between the wars: perceptions of cultural tension, 1918–1941* (Syracuse 1984) 141–155; *Schwarzlose*, *Cooperative news gathering* 157.

¹² Participation rates soared in these newspaper-run straw polls. One run by *Literary Digest* in 1930 tallied 4.8 million participants, around 2 million more than in the most widely observed poll on the 1928 presidential elections. Cf. *Thomas Welskopf*, *Amerikas große Ernüchterung: Eine Kulturgeschichte der Prohibition* [America's great disillusionment: A Cultural History of Prohibition] (Paderborn 2010) 467–469.

¹³ *Michael Schudson*, *The power of news* (Cambridge, Mass., London 1995) 66.

¹⁴ *Michael Schudson*, *The sociology of news* (New York, London 2003) 83–84; *James E. Murphy*, *Tabloids as an urban response*, in: *Catherine L. Covert*, *John D. Stevens*, *Mass media between the wars: perceptions of cultural tension, 1918–1941* (Syracuse 1984) 55–70, here 61–62; *David T. Z. Mindich*, *Just the facts: how "objectivity" came to define American journalism* (New York 1998); *Ford Risley*, *Politics and partisanship*, in: *W. David Sloan*, *Lisa Mulliken Parrell*, *American Journalism: History, Principles, Practices* (Jefferson, N.C., London 2002) 14–22, here 19. When covering the Democratic convention, the *New York Times*, for instance, advertised: For complete, non-partisan news of THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION, read The New York Times (June 15, 1928, section III, 1, italics my emphasis). The *Times* continually sought to convey the new ideal of fair treatment and balance. For example: "What he [i.e. Turtle, the Republicans' candidate for Governor of New York] has said has been fully reported even in the columns of Democratic newspapers. Under the now established doctrine of journalistic fairness in printing both sides, both he and Governor Roosevelt may be sure of a fair hearing", October 18, 1930 (italics my emphasis).

York Times, noted aptly in 1930, Prohibition was "the stuff of which news is made"¹⁵.

Such long-term trends and underlying commercial and editorial strategies affected all newspapers in some measure. But the American press in the interwar years was also shaped by one of the most important news magnates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: William Randolph Hearst, who had assembled a chain of newspapers, magazines, and news services to serve both his economic and political ambitions¹⁶. In sharp contrast to respectable dailies, Hearst's papers made no pretense of covering politics in a balanced, matter-of-fact way. Nor did they follow a clear party line, even though Hearst was elected twice to Congress as a Democrat. Instead, Hearst's (personal) failure to have the Democratic Party nominate him for New York governor or senator in 1922 and even for the Presidency in 1924 led to a (temporary) estrangement from the party. Hearst supported Republicans for much of the decade, only to become later disenchanted by Hoover's presidency and return to the Democratic camp¹⁷. The chain presented and interpreted politics in ways that suited Hearst's inclinations and interests. Addressing mass audiences, the Hearst papers were populist in character, with editorial strategies based upon a more moralistic type of discourse, intense news waves, and media campaigns¹⁸. Since the Hearst papers were eager to influence the public while vying for public support, they were probably more sensitive to possible shifts in public opinion. This makes the Hearst press a particularly interesting venue for analyzing the turn of the tide of the Prohibition issue.

Given the fundamental role of the press in American politics overall and with regard to Prohibition specifically, it is surprising that scholars have not invested much effort in the systematic analysis of press coverage of Prohibition. More often than not, studies focus disproportionately on the *New York Times*¹⁹ only or

¹⁵ Metz, *The Dry Decade* 218–219. Before publishing this book, Metz had already proved to be an expert in analyzing media coverage. In a 1920 study together with Walter Lippmann, Metz had conducted "A Test of the News" (published in *The New Republic*, August 1920), examining news coverage of the *New York Times* on the Russian revolution. This study is still regarded as one of the finest examples of sophisticated media content analysis, cf. *Robert McChesney*, "That was now and this is then: Walter Lippmann and the crisis of journalism, in: *Robert McChesney, Victor Packard*, Will the last reporter please turn out the lights. The collapse of journalism and what can be done to fix it (New York, London 2011) 151–161.

¹⁶ W. A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst* (New York 1961); *Barbara Cloud*, "Hearst, William Randolph", in: *Margaret A. Blanchard*, *History of the mass media in the United States: an encyclopedia* (Chicago, London 1998) 250–251.

¹⁷ *Ben Procter*, *William Randolph Hearst: Final Edition, 1911–1951* (Oxford 2007) 101–122.

¹⁸ *Procter*, *Hearst* 106.

¹⁹ The *New York Times*, even with smaller circulation rates than tabloids, enjoyed a favorable reputation as a "reserved broadsheet", especially for political elites and opinion-leaders. Cf. *Kevin G. Barnhurst, John Nerone*, *The form of news: a history* (New York, London 2001) 252. Also, with a large network of correspondents, the *Times* on a daily basis provided the largest pool of articles that were used by newspapers in various regions of the United States. In this way, the *New York Times* became indispensable for "men of all shades of opinion", as Walter Lippmann observed in his classic *Public Opinion* in 1922.

they make use of an unsystematic sample, without tracing how different papers changed their coverage in the course of the 1920s²⁰. The selection of newspapers in this study takes into account the conflict structures in political communication in the 1920s and 1930s, circulation as evidence of newspaper reach, respectable versus tabloid papers, ownership, especially affiliation with the Hearst chain, and observations made in the press about other newspapers. Additionally, the sample tries to reflect the geographical diversity of the United States and the salient conflict between urban and rural areas, especially between the big cities on the East Coast and the less urbanized Plains. This was manifest also in the stance on the Prohibition issue²¹ – typically in the drys' attempt to discredit the "wet press" from the East Coast for being bribed by the liquor industry and using a wet stance to curry favor with their drinking readership in the larger cities²².

The following analysis thus includes, apart from the *New York Times* (NYT), the *Daily News* (DN), a "wet" New York tabloid whose focus on sex and crime helped to account for its having the highest circulation rate in the United States²³.

²⁰ If dailies other than the *New York Times* are used as sources, it is mostly to illustrate the arguments of journalists and social critics Walter Lippmann or Henry L. Mencken. Thus, newspapers and magazines in this sense are seen mainly to reflect the positions of certain intellectuals or elite more generally, and they are understood mainly as "channels" for messages instead of being analyzed both as platforms with their own logic of selecting and portraying news and as political actors. More recently, authors such as *Kenneth D. Rose*, *American women and the repeal of prohibition* (New York, London 1996) and *Catherine Gilbert Muddock*, *Domesticating drink: Women, men and alcohol in America, 1870–1940* (Baltimore, London 1998) have begun to expand understanding of the press by focusing on the "women's public sphere", analyzing the paper of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and magazines directed at women such as *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Vogue*. These analyses shed light on the role of women in promoting the repeal of Prohibition. However, they tend to underestimate the fact that strategies of women's groups (as with any interest group) depended on visibility and resonance in the established newspapers in order to be effective, as these were the papers to which political actors would most often turn, thus making up the most relevant political public sphere. More recent publications tend to give more weight to the role of the media, for instance *Daniel O'Leary*, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York 2010), *Lerner*, *Dry Manhattan*, or *Welskopp*, *Amerikas große Ernüchterung* 397–399.

²¹ Most studies of Prohibition stress the dividing line between urban and rural regions. Cf., among others, *Richard Hofstadter*, *The age of reform* (New York 1955); *David A. Shannon*, *Between the wars: America, 1919–1941* (Boston 1965); *Gusfield*, *Prohibition*; *Norman H. Clark*, *The dry years: Prohibition and social change in Washington* (Seattle, London 1988 [1965]); cf. also *David E. Kyvig*, *Daily life in the United States, 1920–1939: decades of promise and pain* (Westport, Connecticut, London 2002) 7–20.

²² *Cashman*, *Prohibition* 165.

²³ By the 1920s, tabloids such as the *Daily News*, featuring sensational stories especially linking Prohibition and crime, had become popular in the cities (and detested in other areas) for portraying an "urban reality". Typically, respectable papers ignored the *News* in their regular press reviews (a fate shared by other tabloids), which probably reflected more their professional stance and self imagine and their skepticism of this highly successful press type. The *Daily News* had the highest circulation rate in the country at the end of the 1920s, just five years after it was founded (cf. *Evita J. Pribanic-Smith*, *Sensationalism and tabloidism*, in: *W. David Sloan, Lisa Mulleken Parcell*, *American journalism: history, principles, practices* (Jet-

In addition to these two New York papers, the sample includes one large, fairly prestigious paper from the relatively dry Midwest, the *Kansas City Star* (KCS)²⁴. Out of the numerous *Hearst* publications, the sample includes the daily *Chicago Herald and Examiner* (CHE), a mixture of broadsheet and tabloid, which as a Chicago paper was furthermore confronted with the notorious bootlegging and gang violence in the city. I have examined – comprehensively if inductively – the general news and editorial sections of these newspapers to see how each paper framed political events with regard to the Prohibition issue and, in addition, which events and aspects of the issue the papers downplayed or ignored. From these four papers alone, around 2,200 articles, editorials, and political cartoons in specific time periods and selected months in 1924 (my “control” year) and then from 1928 to 1932 turned out to be relevant. In this way, I hope at least tentatively to assess the salience of the Prohibition issue, to reconstruct journalists’ construction of events and processes, and to do justice to the discursive struggles and framing contests in which the media and politicians engaged.

2. Politicizing Prohibition – the Case of Presidential Elections

Presidential elections obviously structure political communication across the various regions of the United States. This makes their media coverage a good indicator for which political issues attract nationwide attention. In the 1920s, news coverage of presidential elections peaked around the nominating conventions in early summer and then in late October in the run-up to the elections. In Table 1, the growing politicization of the Prohibition issue across presidential campaigns is striking. In 1924, Prohibition was at best one of many issues in the campaign; in 1928, Prohibition probably was *the* crucial issue; and in 1932 it most definitely was that, at least as measured by press coverage. The number of articles explicitly

ferson, N.C., London 2002) 267–276, here 272). “The average circulations for the six months period ending September 1924 were: daily 786, 398; Sunday 807, 279.” Numbers in: *Leo E. McGivern*, *The News: The first fifty years of New York’s Picture Newspaper* (New York 1969) 112.

²⁴ “No other newspaper west of Chicago has as large a circulation as either the morning or evening issue of The Star. Half a million papers go to paid subscribers each week-day and more than 290,000 copies each Sunday. The Weekly Star’s circulation exceeds 500,000 copies. Tuesdays, when The Weekly Star is printed in addition to the Daily issues, the presses of The Kansas City Star produce more than one million papers.” KCS, January 4, 1933. Cf. also *William Howard Taft*, *Missouri Newspapers* (University of Missouri 1964) 247–248. Of course, the *Star*’s situation regarding Prohibition was more complex than sketched out above. Located in a border city between both North and South and East and West, the *Star* was embedded in Missouri, a state with politically changing allegiances and with a strong beer-brewing tradition (St. Louis) that kept Missouri from becoming dry before the advent of the Volstead Act, and in Kansas, known by everybody as the “cradle” of Prohibition and infamous for rigid enforcement and wholehearted support of Prohibition.

linking Prohibition to the electoral contest rose in all newspapers²⁵; it quadrupled from 1924 to 1928 and then almost doubled again from 1928 to 1932²⁶. Readers of *Hearst’s Chicago Herald and Examiner*, for instance, would likely find in 1932 more than three articles each day on Prohibition explicitly as an election topic, often on the front page. When Franklin D. Roosevelt was nominated in 1932, the *New York Daily News* readily made clear the salience of the Prohibition issue in big headlines, stating, “Roosevelt accepts as dripping wet. ‘I, too, want repeal,’ cry of Roosevelt”²⁷. The importance ascribed by the press to Prohibition in 1928 and especially 1932 is manifest.

Table 1: *News articles, editorials, and political cartoons linking Prohibition and presidential elections*

	1924	1928	1932
Chicago Herald and Examiner	16 (0.2)	69 (1.0)	213 (3.2)
Kansas City Star	16 (0.2)	90 (1.3)	113 (1.7)
New York Times	40 (0.6)	127 (1.9)	212 (3.2)
Daily News	(not analyzed)	48 (0.7)	146 (2.2)
Total (without Daily News)	72 (0.4)	286 (1.4)	538 (2.7)

Example: In 1932, the *Kansas City Star* linked 113 news articles, editorials and political cartoons on the presidential elections clearly to Prohibition – 1.7 items per day on average (indicated in brackets). The following dates were analyzed for 1924, 1928, and 1932: June 1 – July 10 and October 20 – November 15 (67 days in each of the three years).

There are several reasons for these large differences over the three election periods, some of which are addressed in the remainder of this chapter. Given that the press reacts to what political actors and interests feed to it, one reason for this shift in attention is that the parties increasingly pushed Prohibition issue. In 1924, the Republicans completely sidestepped it. The Democrats did engage in a fight over the issue at their convention; that year, the *New York Times* paid considerable attention to how New York candidate Al Smith, an outspoken critic of Prohibition, was faring. But the Democrats, fractured that year by their intense fight over the

²⁵ One of the reasons for the higher intensity in the *New York Times* is the larger size of this paper compared to the other papers included in this analysis. It simply carried more articles than most papers.

²⁶ This growing number of articles covering Prohibition does not result from newspapers generally increasing their volume over this period, since the number of front-page articles on prohibition as an election topic rose to the same extent from 1924 to 1932. This is a strong indicator because, even if the overall volume of a newspaper might have increased in the course of the 1920s (thus increasing the chances for any topic to be covered), the number of articles on a front page would have been more likely to sink. The press generally began to print fewer and fewer articles on a front page in this period, which potentially made front-page coverage of Prohibition less likely than before. Cf. *Barnhurst, Nerone*, *The form of news 194–200*.

²⁷ *DN*, July 3, 1932.

Ku Klux Klan, managed only to produce a compromise candidate, John W. Davis, who satisfied none of the factions. With Davis silent on Prohibition as well, no party addressed the issue at all, and none of the newspapers analyzed Coolidge's election victory in November against the background of Prohibition.²⁸

Four years later, however, it was the Democrats and especially their candidate, Al Smith, who capitalized on the Prohibition issue. The New York governor suggested both the modification of the Volstead Act and the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment. Spearheading the critique of Prohibition and attacking the Republicans as the new "prohibition party"²⁹, the Democrats took the risk of alienating significant dry factions within the party, who as "Hoover Democrats"³⁰ came out in support of their party's rival. This split contributed to the realignment of political parties, with the northern and eastern cities becoming Democratic, while some Plains states moved toward the Republicans. Even the solid South experienced a drop in Democratic support, with North Carolina and Virginia breaking away from the Democratic fold³¹.

Smith's move triggered strong reactions³². This prompted the *Daily News* to comment, "The fight this year, in short, is not between Republicans and Democrats, protectionists and free-traders, individualists and state socialists, high hats and lowbrows. It is between Wets and Drys"³³. The reason that Prohibition seemed the main battleground was not because other conflicts were unimportant but because it could be linked to struggles over (regional) identity, religion, federalism, immigration, and crime. Walter Lippmann's observation in 1927 of a conflict between "a whole way of life and an ancient tradition", based on both Prohibition and the evangelical church, and the "emergence of the cities as the dominant force in America"³⁴ summed up a common intellectual assessment. All of the

four papers studied perceived in their news, analyses, editorials and cartoons a "battle between two civilizations"³⁵, whether they supported or criticized Prohibition³⁶.

With this convergence of issues and conflicts, the wet *Daily News* most explicitly but also the slightly more cautious *New York Times* on one side and the *Kansas City Star* on the other side saw themselves representing distinct groups. The papers' remarks and attacks upon one another in editorials and cartoons paralleled and recreated the country's divisions rather merely describing them. The *Daily News* and the *Times*, for instance, saw the large-scale raids in New York night clubs in July 1928, ordered by Republican assistant attorney general Mabel Walker Willebrandt³⁷, as an attempt by rural "dry" forces to attack both candidate Smith and the urban way of life. Meanwhile, the *Kansas City Star* offered a cartoon depicting urban Democrats who supported the wet ticket as desperately crawling in the Prohibition desert and dehydrating through the burning sun (labeled "rigid enforcement")³⁸.

All newspapers, whether wet or dry or neutral, described the presidential candidates in relation to the Prohibition issue. Many more political cartoons linked the parties and candidates to Prohibition than in 1924. Even the *New York Times*, which seldom used cartoons on the editorial page, offered a cartoon of the opposing politicians represented as friends and foes of Prohibition. Herbert Hoover was labeled "H₂O O V E R", while Alfred E. Smith's name was written as "A. L. E. S M I T H"³⁹. Smith himself pushed the issue and stood squarely against Prohibition. Hoover, who for a time sought to leave his options open, was increasingly associated with the dry camp and enjoyed its explicit support⁴⁰. That the election was, or should be, a choice between pro and con positions about Prohibition was also clear to the *Daily News*, which during the fall of 1928 printed daily on its editorial page the slogan: "The presidential election is twenty-one [or twenty, etc.] days off. If you're for prohibition, vote for Hoover. If you're against it, vote for Smith."⁴¹

When it came to the candidates and their stance on Prohibition, even the broadsheets showed few signs of following their new ideal of objectivity. While the *New*

²⁸ In fact, there were no articles on November 5 or 6, the days right after the elections, that emphasized a link between the election and Prohibition.
²⁹ Front page article: G.O.P. SIMPLY DRY PARTY – RASKOB. *San Antonio Express*, October 22, 1928 (report by *Associated Press*).
³⁰ See, for instance, the front page article: HEFLIN SCORES SMITH IN ALBANY SUB-URB. Assails him as Catholic, 'soaking wet', Tammany man, unfit to be President. Klansmen cheer attack. Governor's son-in-law heading troopers guarding meeting, escorts Senator to platform. *NYT*, June 18, 1928, or the editorial: Hoover Democrats, Smith Republicans, *KCS*, July 11, 1928.

³¹ *Welschopp*, *Amerikas große Ernüchterung* 552–559.

³² Cf. *Cashman*, *Prohibition* 183–202; *Gusfield*, *Prohibition* 257–308, here 258; *Günter Schmolders*, *Die Prohibition in den Vereinigten Staaten: Treibkräfte und Auswirkungen des amerikanischen Alkoholverbotes* [Prohibition in the United States. Driving forces and consequences of the American ban on liquor] (Leipzig 1930) 239. Examples of editorials are: DODGING AN ISSUE. How the prohibition plank was framed and insincerely adopted at Kansas City, *NYT*, June 15, 1928; Smith – anti-dry, unafraid, *DN*, June 23, 1928; The democratic party's new leader, *KCS*, June 29, 1928; The new Democratic party, *KCS*, July 13, 1928.

³³ Editorial: Today – vote wet, *DN*, November 6, 1928.

³⁴ "The Eighteenth Amendment is the rock on which the evangelical church militant is founded, and with it are involved a whole way of life and an ancient tradition. The overcoming of the Eighteenth Amendment would mean the emergence of the cities as the dominant

force in America, dominant politically and socially as they are already dominant economically", in: *Walter Lippmann*, *Men of Destiny* (New Brunswick 2003 [1927]), quoted in: *Cashman*, *Prohibition* 183.

³⁵ *Cashman*, *Prohibition* 182.

³⁶ See the following editorials: The South's Problem, *NYT*, October 21, 1928; Smith Back to His Real Issue, *KCS*, October 24, 1928; Smith Depends on Wet Cities, *KCS*, October 27, 1928; The Independent Voter, *KCS*, October 31, 1928; The Dead Hand, *DN*, November 3, 1928. See also: 'RELIGION NO TEST', CRIES ROBINSON; DELEGATES GO WILD. SHUN SPLIT ON LIQUOR, PARTY TOLD, *CHE*, June 28, 1928.

³⁷ *Lerner*, *Dry Decade* 248.

³⁸ Cartoon: Is the ol' swimmin' hole really going to dry up?, *KCS*, July 2, 1928.

³⁹ What's in a name!, *NYT*, July 1, 1928. Section XX (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁰ HOOVER TO GET W.C.T.U. VOTE, *CHE*, June 21, 1928.

⁴¹ Editorial: The Great Western of the Air?, *DN*, October 16, 1928.

York Times rallied behind Smith, in much of the Midwest, Smith was perceived as an imminent threat. Midwestern politicians and the region's dry press assailed Smith's wet stance. In linking the Democrat's views on Prohibition to his Catholicism and his urban upbringing, they turned the conflict over Prohibition into a conflict over the nation's identity⁴². There is no other way to explain the enormous focus on Smith in the *Kansas City Star*, for example. The *Star* printed editorials and cartoons against Smith, who "does not know America"⁴³. In this sense, the *Star* fell in line with one of the region's "famous temperance advocate[s]"⁴⁴, journalist and editor William Allen White, whose *Emporia Gazette* represented the "grassroots Republican Midwest"⁴⁵. White's perception of a conspiracy of Catholics, financial, and liquor interests was also evident in the Hearst papers' campaign against Smith and his involvement with Tammany Hall, "a political mafia, an organization of graft and political blackmail"⁴⁶.

One highly publicized episode in the campaign nicely illustrates how Prohibition merged into a wider discourse over what it means to be American – and how the dry camp still had the upper hand in successfully playing the "un-American" card against Smith. When Smith proposed to let the states decide about Prohibition, including giving them the opportunity to sell liquor under state supervision, Hoover denounced this as a step towards "state socialism"⁴⁷. An economic argument woven into identity politics, this "dread word socialism"⁴⁸ echoed loudly. The *Kansas City Star* applauded the "American policy of Hoover", criticizing Smith for having "the government go into the saloon business" and planning "European experiments with state Socialism... like the Mussolini regime". In his next campaign speech, Smith felt compelled to respond to this reproach, which to be sure gave it more weight⁴⁹. It is telling that opponents could find it plausible to impute anti-American qualities to Smith's rhetoric, which depended on boilerplate Democratic Party references to "Jeffersonian democracy"⁵⁰ when calling for less federal intervention with personal drinking habits. Smith's opponents' focus on identity politics showed a blind spot in the debate: attacking "big government" on the economic dimension but completely failing to criticize the already pronounced rise of "big government" against individual sinners that had come with

the Volstead Act and all its consequences⁵¹. In such ways, opponents insinuated that Smith was one of *them*, while Hoover was one of *us*. East Coast papers in turn denounced such dry attacks on Smith⁵². But while the *New York Times* and the *Daily News* outlined a very different model of America than was presented in the dry press, they would not question Hoover's integrity and his status as a true American.

As politicians and the press had brought Prohibition to the fore during the 1928 campaign, the issue's politicization was evident once the election results were out. Charles Merz observed that "there was no hesitancy on the part of leaders on both sides of the prohibition question to rush into print with ultimate conclusions on the morning after the election"⁵³. The wealth of headlines in all four newspapers just after the elections make it perfectly clear that Prohibition was seen as a crucial factor in explaining voters' behavior, mainly in the victory of "older America" over "newer, urban life"⁵⁴. Smith, who stood for cities and the wet cause, trailed behind Hoover, with his rural backing and more conservative Prohibition policy⁵⁵. But the expectation that, in the words of the *Herald and Examiner*, "the wet question has been relegated to the background so far that it will prove only a minor factor in the next few years"⁵⁶ turned out to be completely wrong. The debate only intensified, with Prohibition becoming a major topic in the months and years to come.

As will be discussed below, this politicization of Prohibition did seem tied to a rapid erosion of Prohibition support starting in 1929. In this context and against the background of the Great Depression, Americans by 1932 had come to expect that something finally and definitely had to be done about Prohibition. That year's presidential elections seemed to some extent a referendum on the matter⁵⁷.

⁵¹ James A. Morone, *Hellfire nation: the politics of sin in American history* (New Haven, London 2003) 343–345.

⁵² See the front page articles: WHITE IN HOT REPLY. Governor Smith's attack on Kansas editor brings a prompt retort. Never heard of Miller. But the Emporian challenges governor to deny charge of interview. Warns dry democrats. 'Shall Smith tammanyize America or shall we americanize Tammany?', *KCS*, July 15, 1928, or: SMITH STRIKES BACK AT WHITE'S CHARGES. Governor defends his record in legislature, attacked by Kansas editor. Says reformer gave data. Tabulation on gambling, saloon and anti-vice bills is branded as nonsense, *NYT*, July 15, 1928.

⁵³ Merz, *Dry Decade* 231.

⁵⁴ In the *Kansas City Star's* view, "the effort to impose a city control crashed on moral principles". See: The older America wins, *KCS*, November 7, 1928: "Smith represented the big city, its cosmopolitanism, its impatience with what an eminent New Yorker once called 'the moral yearnings of rural communities', its absorption in itself, its failure to think nationally. Hoover was the embodiment of the qualities and standards of the older rural and small city America, which still controls the country. In the election yesterday the newer, urban life clashed with the older tradition, and the older America swept to victory."

⁵⁵ *Murdock*, Domesticating drink 118. See, for instance, the editorial: Hoover wins, *DN*, November 7, 1928.

⁵⁶ Driest Congress Elected: Wet Issue Evaporates, *CHE* (report by *Universal Services*), November 8, 1928.

⁵⁷ David E. Kyvig, *Repealing national prohibition* (Kent, Ohio, London 2000 [1979]) 159.

⁴² *Cashman*, Prohibition 191–192.

⁴³ Editorial: The Democratic Party's New Leader, *KCS*, June 29, 1928.

⁴⁴ See *KCS*, April 6, 1933.

⁴⁵ *Risley*, Politics and partisanship 19–20.

⁴⁶ Editorial: DON'T FORGET WHAT WE TOLD YOU. TAMMANY TIGER – A VITAL ISSUE IN THIS CAMPAIGN. The people do not want Tammany. They do want prosperity and happiness (Hearst), *CHE*, November 4, 1928.

⁴⁷ Front page article: THRONING OF 22,000 IN THE GARDEN HEARS HOOVER AS SAIL SMITH'S POLICIES AS STATE SOCIALISM; OPPOSES PUTTING GOVERNMENT INTO BUSINESS, SPECIFIES THREE ISSUES, *NYT*, October 23, 1928.

⁴⁸ Editorial: Today! Dread Word, 'Socialism', *CHE*, October 24, 1928.

⁴⁹ SMITH SEIZES SOCIALIST CRY, *CHE*, October 25, 1928.

⁵⁰ Editorial: Mr. Hughes at Buffalo, *DN*, October 29, 1928.

Accordingly, trials of bootleggers or raids on speakeasies gained less and less attention in the press, with more and more articles focusing on the political system and the anticipated showdown between the wets and the drys. Among the possible options how to finally solve the issue, repeal quickly turned out to be the simplest, most convincing answer. The word "repeal" seemed to be everywhere: it had popped up only in 2 percent of all headlines on the Prohibition issue in 1928 or 1929, suggesting that this strategy was not yet considered a real option. But in 1932, it was used in more than one quarter of all headlines on Prohibition.

Rather than two separate questions in the electoral contest, Prohibition and the Great Depression became "twin issues."⁵⁸ The argument that the legalization of liquor, especially beer, would bring welcome tax revenue appeared frequently.⁵⁹ Beer became the alcoholic beverage referred to most often in the headlines in 1932. (In the 1920s, when Prohibition seemed more popular, headlines referred more often to "rum," with its negative connotations.) The focus on beer is striking, as throughout the decade, numerous proposals for modifying the Volstead Act called for legalization of beer and light wine. Given the cultural patterns of American working-class men, it makes sense that beer rather than wine came to occupy the center of pro-repeal rhetoric especially in view of the economic crisis.⁶⁰ But even more, the legal return of alcohol promised that the country in distress was able to solve problems in a humane way, a contrast to the seemingly cold social engineering solutions offered by the Hoover administration.

The media contributed to rising public hopes for repeal by claiming a shift in public opinion – based on ambiguous evidence of course – and suggesting that they would stand for what the public wanted. When John D. Rockefeller Jr., a long-time supporter of Prohibition and the Anti-Saloon League⁶¹, wrote that he would give up Prohibition and support repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment⁶², newspapers regarded this as "perhaps the most dramatic single event bearing on the liquor question since the adoption of Prohibition"⁶³. Rockefeller's shift in stance filled front pages. The *Daily News* cheerfully stated, "Even Rockefeller is

convinced."⁶⁴ The *Times* saw both Prohibition and an era of "tyranny" coming to an end.⁶⁵ In this seemingly "historic" moment, Hearst himself did not want to stand apart and quickly intensified his wet campaign by printing his own political statement (including his signature) on the front page of all his newspapers and explaining his moral "crusade" against Prohibition, which he labeled a "disastrous and nationally demoralizing failure"⁶⁶. In a textbook case of the "bandwagon effect", the faster that prominent Prohibitionists switched sides and joined the "repeal army"⁶⁷, the more media and public opinion seemed to create an irresistible momentum. It was as though the cork of a champagne bottle in which pressure had slowly built then suddenly exploded.⁶⁸ Even the *Kansas City Star* grudgingly admitted that the "wets now are the aggressors. They hold the advantage of a shift in public sentiment"⁶⁹.

Against the background of this "onrushing wet tide"⁷⁰ and rising expectations of a "showdown"⁷¹, the 1932 party conventions were portrayed in a radically simple way: Which party would nominate a "dripping wet" who would speak unequivocally for repeal? Typical of a situation of insecurity where complexity has to be reduced to restore some sense of orientation, press coverage drowned out the variety of other issues at stake and focused on one problem only (Prohibition), on one solution only (repeal), and on one way of showing who was seemingly all for Prohibition (Republicans) or all against Prohibition (Democrats). Hearst's *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, for instance, for several days linked all articles on the first five pages about the Republican convention explicitly to the Prohibition issue. The demand for repeal had "risen to something of that urgency and irrefutability in the controversy over what to do about prohibition", in the words of the *New York Times*⁷². The repeal idea made all other, more complex suggestions for solving the Prohibition question seem contradictory or insufficient. When the Republicans rejected repeal but vowed to resubmit the question to Congress and the

⁵⁸ Editorial: Even Rockefeller is convinced, *DN*, June 8, 1932.

⁵⁹ Editorial: Ending a tyranny, *NYT*, June 9, 1932.

⁶⁰ "But three years ago the Hearst papers decided that prohibition was a disastrous and nationally demoralizing failure and that it was not the part of patriotism longer to remain blind to its abuses and silent in the face of its fearful effects. For three years, therefore, the Hearst papers have crusaded against prohibition and for the substitution of some more successful temperance measure. We regard our crusade against prohibition a natural and logical and inevitable part of the crusade which for the whole existence of the Hearst newspaper institution we have waged against drunkenness, against concentrated alcoholic liquor and against the saloon." Extract from the front page article: MR. ROCKEFELLER'S CONSCIENTIOUS CONVICTION ON PROHIBITION, *CHE*, June 8, 1932.

⁶¹ Cartoon: The call to arms, *CHE*, June 10, 1932.

⁶² *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 160–161.

⁶³ Editorial: The nation will not be stampeded, *KCS*, June 14, 1932.

⁷⁰ Example: REPUBLICAN DRY LEADERS RALLY THEIR FORCES TO STEM THE ONRUSHING WET TIDE. CANNON SAYS DRYS ARE READY FOR VOTE, *NYT*, June 13, 1932.

⁷¹ Example: BUTLER PLANS SHOWDOWN ON REPEAL PLANK, *DN*, June 6, 1932.

⁷² Editorial: More than a catchword, *NYT*, June 14, 1932.

⁵⁸ *Lerner*, *Dry Manhattan* 290; cf. also *James E. Campbell*, *Party Systems and Realignments in the United States, 1868–2004*, in: *Social Science History* 30/3 (2006) 376.

⁵⁹ Examples: STRAWN URGES DRY REPEAL AS SPUR TO TRADE. Wans presidential aspirants must be liberal: sure Hoover backs resubmission, *CHE*, June 8, 1932; LEADERS OF 2,500,000 WETS UNITE TO FIGHT FOR REPEAL. SPURRED BY ROCKEFELLER. PLAN POLITICAL PRESSURE, *NYT*, June 8, 1932; PROHIBITION HAS CHEATED U.S. OF 18 BILLIONS TAX! SAYS CRUSADERS' CHIEF. ACT 'CRUCIFYING YOUTH ON RAIL OF SPEAKEASY', *CHE*, June 10, 1932; SLOAN IS FOR REPEAL. Abolishment of eighteenth amendment is urged. The General Motors head say he is convinced it is the way to bring greater temperance, *KCS*, June 12, 1932.

⁶⁰ Cf. *Edward Behr*, *Prohibition: thirteen years that changed America* (New York 1996) 234; *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 134–136.

⁶¹ Editorial: Mr. Rockefeller for repeal, *NYT*, June 7, 1932, 13.

⁶² *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 152–153; *Rose*, American women and the repeal of prohibition 123–124; *Clark*, Deliver us from evil 201.

⁶³ Rockefeller move is a dramatic one, *NYT*, June 7, 1932, 12.

American people for a vote – a stance unthinkable even two years before and shared now even by the dry *Kansas City Star*⁷³ – this was not seen as a rational suggestion but simply as contradictory and insufficient. The *Star* claimed, “The liquor plank is clear” and “explicit enough to any intelligent person who cares to give it a moment of serious attention”. But in the view of the *New York Times*, the *Baltimore Sun*’s journalist and social critic H. L. Mencken, and the vast majority of the papers, the “Hoover dry-wet plank”⁷⁴ was merely a “wet-dry straddle”⁷⁵ which “at least has the great virtue of being quite unintelligible to simple folk”⁷⁶. In this time of uncertainty, only clear and unequivocal stances were considered acceptable.

This tendency toward simplification was also clear in the way that temporal terms were used. The political vocabulary of the wets consisted of metaphors reflecting urgency (e.g. “*immediate* modification”) and determination (e.g. “*on-the-spot* repeal”). They suggested a determinate step in the near future. The dries on the other hand, clinging to the status quo, often countered that repeal was too “radical”, too “fast”, and did not provide a “safe haven” or a “guarantee” in this troubling time. Dries feared that repeal would throw the nation into chaos⁷⁷ and would represent a step backwards in American history⁷⁸. Republicans came across as cautious and defensive, while the Democrats seemed determined and active. In political cartoons, the Republican elephant was ailing. It was forced to swallow the medicine of repeal, or it feared of jumping into the water of repeal while the energetic Democratic donkey would take the plunge⁷⁹. The majority of newspapers made it impeccably clear that repealing Prohibition would lift a large burden from Americans and free them from an unwanted past. A bold move to get rid of Prohibition and to work out a new future was the call of the hour⁸⁰. And strikingly, while the economic planks of the two parties seemed too complicated to understand, it was exactly the “repeal planks” of the parties that were used to illustrate where the two competing parties generally diverged in their ideas as to what road the country should take⁸¹. Given the extraordinary attention to Prohibition during the watershed election of 1932, it is probably difficult to find

⁷³ Editorial: Dr. Butler answers Mr. Borah, *KCS*, June 21, 1932.

⁷⁴ Front page article: CONVENTION ADOPTS HOOVER DRY-WET PLANK; REPEALISTS WAGE A FUTILE BATTLE ON FLOOR. UPROAR AMONG DELEGATES AND IN GALLERIES. MILLS RULES IN DRAFTING. REPEAL REJECTED, 681–472, *NYT*, June 16, 1932.

⁷⁵ WET PLANK WITH STRADDLE APPROVED BY HOOVER, *DN*, June 15, 1932.

⁷⁶ Quoted in: *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 155.

⁷⁷ Editorial: A Booze Test for Democracy, *KCS*, June 28, 1932; editorial: America will play safe on liquor, *KCS*, November 4, 1932. Editorial on the Democrats: Indicated Democratic Strategy, *KCS*, June 29, 1932.

⁷⁸ The Republicans’ liquor plank included the statement: “The American nation never in its history has gone backward.” See editorial: Tests of the plank, *NYT*, June 18, 1932.

⁷⁹ Cartoon: The Donkey Takes the Plunge, *CHE*, July 6, 1932.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Clarke*, Deliver us from evil 168–180; *Morone*, Hellfire nation 343–344.

⁸¹ *Lerner*, Dry Manhattan 299; *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 168.

another moment in modern American history when drinking had a similarly profound impact on politics and society.

3. Prohibition outside Presidential Politics

The politicization of Prohibition – its movement to the center of electoral campaigns – forms a large part of the explanation of the growing salience and intensity of the Prohibition issue. Of course, political campaigns only make sense within a specific opinion climate, which itself has been shaped by all sorts of events, processes and actors. To investigate more deeply the changing climate surrounding Prohibition and the increasing call for repeal in the press and by the press, this section looks at periods that were, for the most part, not shaped by the presence of these campaigns. I also investigated non-campaign months such as January 1924, 1928, 1929, and 1931, as well as the first half year of 1929 to see how the Prohibition issue, politicized in 1928, gained intensity rather than being buried in the wake of Hoovers’ landslide victory.

Figure 1 illustrates the number of articles per month on the Prohibition issue. It shows that in January 1924, a control month in this analysis, the media did report on Prohibition, the “stuff of which news is made”. Readers of the *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, for instance, would find one article about Prohibition almost every day in their paper in January 1924 (see figure 1). However, the papers displayed comparatively little attention to Prohibition compared to the period between 1928 and 1932. In the first years following the implementation of the Volstead Act, the American press was mostly favorable to Prohibition, apart from newspapers carrying outspoken critics such as Mencken⁸². Although many journalists in private voiced opposition to Prohibition, most newspapers, even the *New York Times*, were reluctant to openly criticize the policy⁸³. As noted by the *Times* journalist Charles Metz in 1930, a newspaper would print a number of articles friendly to Prohibition simply because not only bad news but also good news about Prohibition would be interesting news and thus attractive to the readership⁸⁴. Apart from that, the ideal of objectivity and fair treatment helped Prohibition. Especially the broadsheets, in a move that underlined their ‘seriousness’ in relying on relevant, official sources, would print official reports and statements from politicians and officials supporting the congressional and government line on Prohibition.

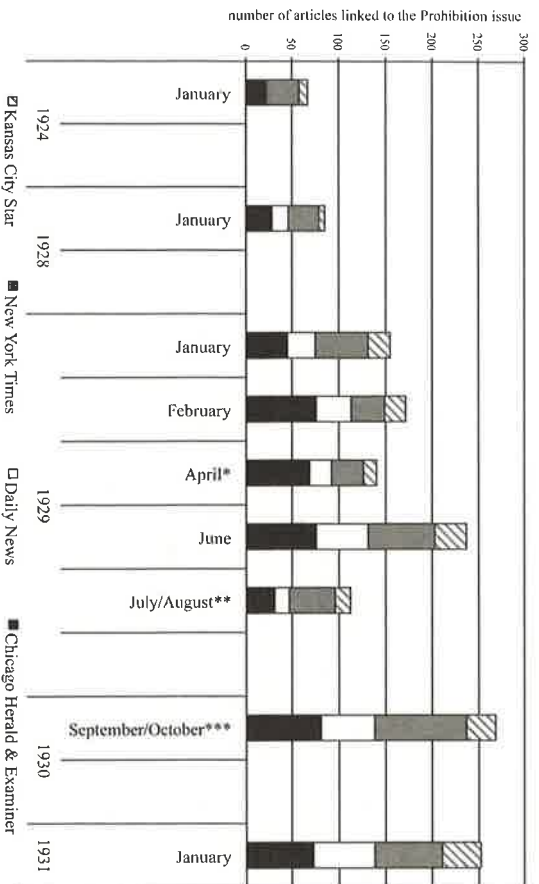
But overall, given the fact that bad news still attracts more attention than good news, it comes as no surprise that the relatively favorable view of Prohibition in the early 1920s coincided with a relatively low number of articles, as compared to the late 1920s. Prohibition was not yet considered a real problem, and so the press

⁸² *Murdock*, Domesticating drink 93.

⁸³ *Rose*, American women and the repeal of prohibition 53–54.

⁸⁴ *Metz*, Dry decade 218–219.

Figure 1: Growing Attention to Prohibition



Note: Newspapers were analyzed for entire months. Exceptions: the *Daily News* was not analyzed for January 1924, * = April 1 – April 15, 1929, ** = July 15 – August 10, 1929, *** = September 20 – October 20, 1930.

was not yet preoccupied with it. Neither the New York papers sampled nor the *Kansas City Star* or *Chicago Herald and Examiner* devoted as much attention to Prohibition as they would later in the decade. Although conflicts between gangs and racketeers in Chicago were widely covered in the Hearst press, his newspapers hardly ever connected this sort of crime to Prohibition itself. And although the powerful Pendergast machine in Kansas City was believed to violate Prohibition by protecting organized bootleggers, the openly dry *Kansas City Star* did not dwell on the connection either.⁸⁵ For the most part during the first half of the 1920s, newspapers had not yet espoused the notion that Prohibition created crime, an image that became widespread later and contributed greatly to the erosion of public support. Based on press treatment in 1924, one can conclude, in line with Kenneth D. Rose, that the American press was maybe writing about Prohibition but certainly not against it.⁸⁶ And even in January 1928, both attention to and wet criticism of Prohibition were far less intense than what ensued after Al Smith's nomination that summer.

⁸⁵ John S. Matlin, *Political Party Machines of the 1920s and 1930s*: Tom Pendergast and The Kansas City Democratic Machine (Thesis: University of Birmingham 2009) 94–95, 234–236.
⁸⁶ Rose, *American women and the repeal of prohibition* 53–54, paraphrasing Merz, *Dry decade* 218–219; *Murdock*, *Domesticating drink* 93.

As seen above, the politicization of Prohibition in the course of presidential elections had durable consequences, changing both the level of attention to Prohibition and the way it was criticized (see figure 1). By the end of the 1920s, Prohibition had made “the whole nation booze-conscious”⁸⁷, producing a political discourse where persons, parties, and social groups were lumped under the all-explaining labels of “wet” or “dry”. The “dry law” constantly appeared in headlines. Several types of events and processes increased attention to Prohibition even after the presidential elections of 1928. The media focused more and more on deliberations in Congress, for example during debate over the controversial Jones Act of 1929, which increased penalties for bootlegging. The press intensified its linkage of crime to Prohibition, devoting much attention to spectacular events raids and shootings, especially after the Valentine's Day Massacre in February 1929. Newspapers also interpreted the congressional elections of 1930, which saw massive Republican losses, as a vote on Prohibition even more than on the Depression.

The attention to Prohibition also strikingly peaked in January 1931, when newspapers devoted their front pages to the report of the Wickersham Commission, which President Hoover had established in 1929 in the vain hope of devising practical improvements to Prohibition enforcement while calming public misgivings. Long and complicated government studies do not under ordinary circumstances make so many headlines. However, the expert report named for former attorney general George Wickersham, the commission's chair, had been eagerly anticipated in a climate of growing hostility toward Prohibition. The *New York Times* even announced the report above its “flag”⁸⁸, a method it hardly ever used, and Hearst's paper, which just recently had added to its own political platform the “modification of the Volstead act to permit light wines and beers under federal regulations”⁸⁹, published, with remarkable intensity, ten articles on the report on January 21 alone. Contrary to Hoover's intention, the report proved another serious blow to Prohibition. It showed, as newspapers emphasized, that Prohibition as it existed could not be enforced. But the wealth of results was confusing and did not provide what everybody expected – a clear answer what to do now about Prohibition. Worse still for Prohibition, and fueling further media attention, the press did not accept either the study's results or the Hoover administration's gloss upon them as balanced and objective. Hoover as a “dry leader”⁹⁰ was believed to have misinterpreted the report in his own favor and even to have influenced the commission's presentation. While the majority of the committee had offered cautious support for moderate modifications to the Volstead Act, Hoover claimed that the committee had in fact recommended further enforcement of the law.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Henry L. Mencken, *The American language*. An inquiry into the development of English in the United States (New York 1963).

⁸⁸ Above “New York Times”, the paper wrote “In this issue: full text of prohibition report”.

⁸⁹ On January 14, 1931, this was listed as point 12 on the editorial page under: THE HEARST PAPERS ADVOCATE.

⁹⁰ Editorial: Today, *CHE*, January 23, 1931.

⁹¹ *Cashman*, *Prohibition* 208–210.

This seriously undermined Hoover's credibility⁹². The *Daily News*, with its attack on the "Wickersham report"⁹³, the *Times*, and the *Herald and Examiner* all denounced Hoover for not even following his own "government by commission". Hoover thus transformed his reputation from an above-the-fray "engineer" to a manipulative "politician"⁹⁴, "denying his own"⁹⁵. Firmly sticking the dry label on Hoover and already anticipating that Prohibition would dominate the 1932 elections⁹⁶, anti-Prohibition newspapers depicted the president as a hopelessly optimistic captain of a ship that was sinking in the waves of the "anti-dry sentiment" (see illustration 1). In the aftermath of the Wickersham report, the newspapers heightened their pressure. The *Daily News*, for instance, changed its "platform" a few days after the report's publication, no longer demanding "modification of the Eighteenth Amendment" but rather its outright repeal⁹⁷. Even the dry *Star* sensed Prohibition's failure. In calling for reform of the Jones Law and not editorializing against critics of the Wickersham report, the *Star*, while still officially supporting Prohibition, already seemed to have given up the fight.

The newspapers surveyed for this chapter, therefore, responded to the Wickersham report in ways that continued and accelerated trends present for over two years. Even before publication of the Wickersham report, and thus long before the presidential elections in 1932, both public opinion and media reporting had decisively shifted on Prohibition. A poll by the National Economic League in 1930 showed that not the economy but "Prohibition" and two problems related to it, "lawlessness / disrespect for law" and the "administration of justice", were listed as the top three problems facing the country. The repeat poll in 1931 found similar results⁹⁸. As the next section shows, these were exactly the problems that constantly made the headlines from early 1929 on. A feedback loop seemed to emerge, with citizens reacting to problems on which the media dwelled, while newspapers attributed their intensified coverage to shifting public opinion. Starting in summer 1929, the number of articles skyrocketed that explicitly talked about or illustrated a "shift" in public opinion, with editors perceiving a "wet groundswell", "wet tide" or "wet storm". In 1930, the *Daily News* already printed a "History of Volsteadism", with the Pisa-like tower of Prohibition beginning to fall⁹⁹. The *New York Times* saw the sword of Damocles dangling over the dries¹⁰⁰, while Hearst's Chicago paper perceived an avalanche of the wet sentiment¹⁰¹. An analysis of

Illustration 1: Cartoon "The optimists", *New York Times*, February 1, 1931, Section IX.



media reports by Hoover's staff reinforces the perception that the press understood the outcome of the 1930 congressional elections more as a vote for the repeal of Prohibition than as a vote expressing concern for the ailing economy¹⁰². "Nullification", i.e. ignoring of Prohibition without officially repealing the relevant laws, or a "middle ground"¹⁰³ increasingly appeared as an unviable option. Thus, by 1930, the wets indicated that they would no longer be satisfied with modifications of the Volstead Act¹⁰⁴. Repeal was now their "fighting word"¹⁰⁵.

The growing resonance of calls for outright repeal was manifest in numerous newspapers. A survey of 110 daily papers initiated by the *New York Herald-Tribune* in early 1930 showed that the circulation of the self-declared "wet

⁹² *Welschopp*, Amerikas große Ernüchterung 564–566.

⁹³ Editorial: The Wickersham report, *DN*, January 21, 1931.

⁹⁴ Editorial: Facts, figures and Hoover, *DN*, January 22, 1931.

⁹⁵ Editorial: Denying his own, *NYT*, January 22, 1931.

⁹⁶ WICKERSHAM REPORT HOOVER'S 1932 STAND. DRY SURVEY TODAY GOES TO CONGRESS, *DN*, January 20, 1931.

⁹⁷ GEE WHIZ! HERE'S MORE ON THE EIGHTEENTH AMENDMENT!, *DN*, January 24, 1931.

⁹⁸ *Lerner*, Dry Decade 277.

⁹⁹ Cartoon: Prohibition, *DN*, October 26, 1930.

¹⁰⁰ Cartoon: Our modern Damocles, *NYT*, September 28, 1930, Section XX.

¹⁰¹ Cartoon: He little knows what's coming, *CHE*, October 3, 1930.

¹⁰² For President Hoover's newspaper collection, his staff made a "Summary of Editorial Comments on Elections, November 8, 1930". For this summary, editorials from 140 newspapers reaching around 9 million overall were classified with "Wet-dry issue most important factor", while 136 newspapers reaching around 7 million received the label "Chief factor to be believed depression". Thus, Prohibition rather than the depression was held responsible for the election outcome. Cf. Herbert C. Hoover Archives, "Confidential", Presidential Papers-Press Relations, Box 1165, quoted in: Robert M. Eisinger, Gauging public opinion in the Hoover White House: understanding the roots of presidential polling, in: *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30/4 (2000) 643–661, here: 656–657.

¹⁰³ Editorial: No middle ground, *NYT*, September 24, 1930.

¹⁰⁴ AFTER REPEAL – WHAT? ANSWERS BY SIX 'WETS'. The programs laid down by three Republican and three Democratic leaders for the annulment of the prohibition amendment and the restoration of the control of the liquor traffic to the states, *NYT*, September 21, 1930, Section XX.

¹⁰⁵ Candidate and platform, *NYT*, September 27, 1930.

papers" was four times as high as that of the "dry papers", while a lot of smaller rural newspapers had started to shift their positions on the issue.¹⁰⁶ An analysis by the President's Research Committee on Social Trends published in 1934 revealed that in 1931, there were more than twice as many articles in newspapers and magazines against Prohibition as for its enforcement – a complete reversal of the situation in 1919.¹⁰⁷

The structure of the newspaper business seemed to play a part in this trend toward more negative Prohibition coverage. A regional dry paper such as the *San Antonio Express* still was pledging strict enforcement in its editorials.¹⁰⁸ However, about three quarters of Prohibition coverage in news articles in that paper relied on news agencies, mainly the Associated Press from New York.¹⁰⁹ In this way, the national problem of enforcement became a topic even in generally dry Texas. Overall, smaller newspapers' extensive use of press services served to undermine Prohibition's support in formerly dry areas.¹¹⁰ So even before the crash of 1929 and the advent of the Great Depression, Prohibition supporters increasingly had a difficult time legitimizing it in the midst of growing negative news.

4. Media Campaigns and the Radicalization of Discourse

Both attention and opposition to Prohibition suddenly increased in 1928 with Al Smith's electoral campaign – and also later intensified even more. Hoover's landslide victory did not bring the debate to a close, even if the drys tried to argue that the American people had overwhelmingly spoken in favor of Prohibition. Instead, the debate escalated during the first half of 1929. Since Prohibition was one of the main issues of the campaign in 1928, it came as no surprise that various interests interpreted the electoral outcome from this perspective, a fact that had policy implications right away.¹¹¹ Americans expected that Hoover would actually do something about Prohibition. Both before and after the election, the ambiguous signals sent by Hoover were closely watched and hotly debated.¹¹² For a time,

¹⁰⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, April 7, 1930, quoted in: *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 117.

¹⁰⁷ *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends (New York, London 1934).

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, the editorial: "... For the Jones Amendment to the Volstead Act, *San Antonio Express*, February 21, 1929, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Applying the same criteria used for the analysis of the other newspapers, one can build a subsample with the *San Antonio Express*. The numbers for February 1–28, 1929 and June 1–30, 1929 include 95 articles on Prohibition, 71 of which came from news agencies.

¹¹⁰ *John C. Burnham*, Bad habits: drinking, smoking, taking drugs, gambling, sexual misbehavior, and swearing in American history (New York, London 1993) 34–38; *Cashman*, Prohibition 165.

¹¹¹ *Merz*, Dry decade 231–232. Cf. for instance: DRYs AND WETS SEE VICTORY IN ELECTION, *NYT*, November 8, 1928.

¹¹² Cf. for instance: 'HOOVER DODGER' – SMITH AL RAKES FOE AS DODGER.

compromise between the wets and the drys did not seem out of reach. When Hoover announced in early 1929 that he would implement a committee that would examine the problem of Prohibition and crime, this type of "social engineering", the finding of problem-solutions through fact-seeking deliberation of committees, appealed to serious newspapers such as the *New York Times*.

But after Hoover had raised expectations for a systematic, well-reasoned compromise, the wets were ever more disappointed to find that as president, Hoover took clearly dry positions¹¹³, becoming the first president since Woodrow Wilson to become really involved in the Prohibition issue.¹¹⁴ Hoover in effect ceded the issue to dry factions within the Republican Party, who in turn radicalized their rhetoric, in part by labeling Hoover's victory a mandate for the stricter enforcement of Prohibition.¹¹⁵ Tellingly, papers such as the *Kansas City Star*, whose stance was definitely but not uncompromisingly dry, warned against forming the Wickersham Commission, which the *Star* feared might stir up the issue of Prohibition again to its disadvantage. The *Star* also tried to backpedal on tougher measures such as the Jones Act, calling it too drastic a measure which eventually might undermine Prohibition's appeal. But prominent drys ranging from Senator William Borah to the Methodist bishop James Cannon Jr. prevailed.

Meanwhile, even though Smith had lost the election, there still were enough signs that made the wets hopeful. Beyond Democratic gains among urban constituencies, the mere fact that Prohibition had become a major issue and started to break up the old electoral patterns showed the wets that political resistance was promising. And since the wets could point to their support in the country's dynamic cities¹¹⁶, they had reasons to believe that time was on their side. Thus the wets realized that they might have lost one battle but not the fight. Even so, the Jones Act demonstrated that the drys retained the upper hand, at least for a time. The wets seemed to face a prolonged period of raised and then frustrated expectations.

But perhaps the most important reason for the speed and timing of the perceptible shift in Prohibition sentiment and discourse lies in the campaign of the Hearst press. On January 4, 1929, around two months before Hoover's inauguration, Hearst publicly switched sides. A formerly staunch supporter of Prohibition whose papers regularly preached its benefits¹¹⁷, Hearst now advocated a "better plan" in view of the "criminal conditions created by [the] dry law". He invited

22,000 ROAR IN GARDEN AT FINAL RALLY, *DN*, November 4, 1928; HOOVER TO HOLD PUBLIC INQUIRY ON DRY ENFORCEMENT, *CHE*, January 11, 1929.

¹¹³ *Clark*, Deliver us from evil 189–192.

¹¹⁴ *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 30, 98–103.

¹¹⁵ PROHIBITION UPHELD DRY CHIEFS SAY. Three view election as proof that the voters repudiated Smith liquor plan. Religious issue decided. Dr. Wilson says result was not a referendum on faiths' – Cherrington pledges Hoover support, *NYT*, November 8, 1928; *Kywig*, Repealing national prohibition 103.

¹¹⁶ *Welskopf*, Amerikas große Ernüchterung 553–557.

¹¹⁷ See, for instance, the editorial: Four perils, all imaginary, *CHE*, October 25, 1924 or the cartoon: The plank for him, *CHE*, June 28, 1924.

readers to participate in a "temperance contest", where they should send in essays outlining their solutions¹¹⁸. It is difficult to determine whether Hearst changed his point of view on grounds of principle or whether he sensed the shifting tide of public and tried to ride the wave as a successful newspaper editor¹¹⁹. But in any case, Hearst was willing and above all powerful enough to publicize his new commitment to revising if not abolishing Prohibition. Hearst's "temperance contest", which suggested genuine debate, disguised the mass media campaign against Prohibition he had decided to implement. Never mind the ideal of objectivity, Hearst now mainly gave voice to Prohibition critics along with his own comments on the deteriorating conditions he attributed to the dry law. Amid well-orchestrated publicity, including the hyperbolic claim that the "whole world" was watching the outcome, Hearst effectively used the contest to draw attention to his chain's new role as champion of the wets. When the jury decided in June 1929 to award the prizes after reviewing 71,248 proposals, this gave the Hearst press another opportunity to fill its pages with large headlines along with details of the best plans.

In marked contrast to 1924 or 1928, the Hearst papers from early 1929 on used numerous political cartoons to attack Prohibition. Hearst insinuated that many a politician who "votes dry" actually "drinks wet"¹²⁰. This moral outrage did not imply a positive view of drinking, since the Hearst press proclaimed its stance to be against Prohibition but for temperance. The chain papers gave space to anti-alcohol pastors and teachers and still depicted alcohol, together with parties and permissive parents, as evils that threatened American children and teenagers, a theme not used by the other newspapers analyzed for this chapter¹²¹. Significantly, Hearst now blamed Prohibition for creating the very climate of "whoopie" that seduced America's young into partying, speeding – and drinking. Stressing the negative impact of alcohol on the archetypal American family, Hearst thus used the same arguments the Prohibition supporters had used for a long time. He selected people to criticize Prohibition who still represented those parts of society most associated with the policy. In trespassing in this way on the

¹¹⁸ "The purpose of this plan is patriotic. It is not to set in motion merely a competition but to secure for the public good a practicable plan that will prove of value in the development of better moral, social and political life in this country. There must be, in the natural evolution of the human race and society, a better plan to advance temperance than that of prohibition with its speakasies, its poisons, its un-American espionage and its law defiance even by those entrusted with the enforcement of the law." In: Here are the details of the W.R. Hearst \$25,000 PRIZE OFFER for the best plan to achieve temperance, *CHE*, January 20, 1929 (original emphasis).

¹¹⁹ The reading of Hearst's latest biography suggests the latter reason, as Hearst regularly used "crusades" as a means to keep his fingers on the pulse of the public and entertain the readership of his newspapers. *Procter*, Hearst 244–246. Stunningly, however, this lengthy biography devotes less than a paragraph on Hearst's stance on Prohibition and does not even problematize Hearst's about-face (cf. 149–150).

¹²⁰ Cartoon: HE VOTES DRY; HE DRINKS WET, *CHE*, April 27, 1929.

¹²¹ See, for instance, the cartoon: 'Step into my parlor', *CHE*, April 18, 1929.

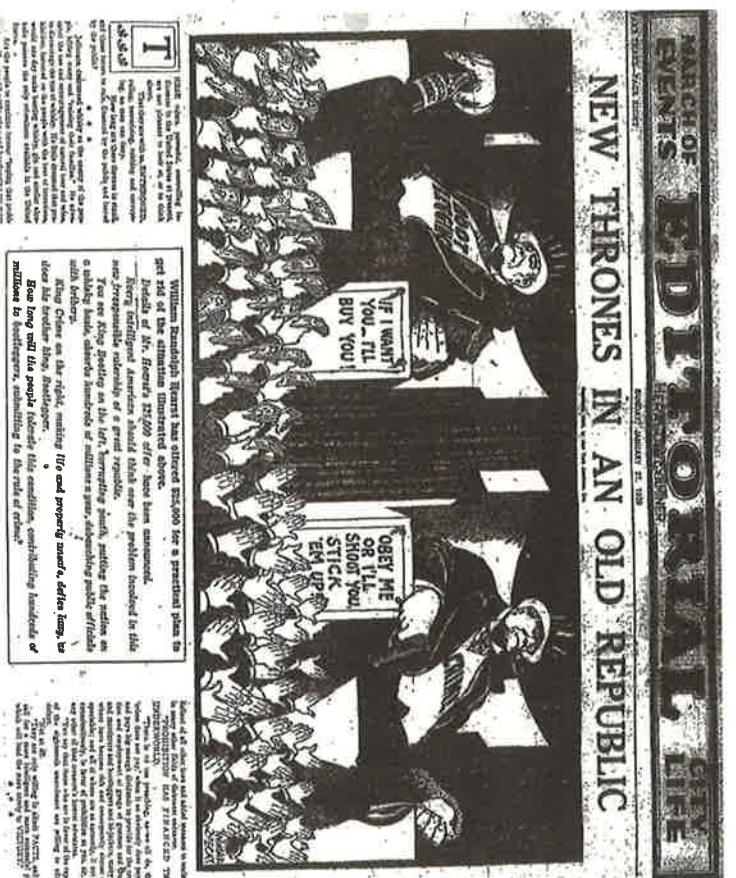


Illustration 2: Cartoon "New thrones in an old republic", Chicago Herald and Examiner, January 27, 1929, Part Three, p. 8.

Prohibitionists' stock of arguments, the Hearst papers redirected the popular, moralistic discourse long associated with the drys¹²². Applying this strategy of depicting both drinking and Prohibition as evil, Hearst tried to strike a chord with his increasingly wet readership without alienating dry readers, whom he had so long courted.

Also, in contrast to a few years earlier, the Hearst papers explicitly linked the crime situation to Prohibition. The chain now argued that far from ending lawlessness, Prohibition created it. Even before the spectacular shootings on Valentine's Day in Chicago in February, the paper illustrated its "temperance contest" and depicted the nation as presided over by "new thrones in an old republic", with grim, stout, gargantuan twins, "King Bootleg" and "King Crime", sitting next to each other, while dozens of little hands either waved money at "King Bootleg" or went up in the air to show signs of surrender (see illustration 2). In another cartoon, a gigantic bottle of "hooch" was pouring "bootlegging", "speakasys",

¹²² *Welskopf*, Amerikas große Ernüchterung 459.

"corruption", and "lawlessness" on American cities, which it mired "in the foul slime of disrespect for law"¹²³.

Hearst's about-face was a slap in the face of the drys, for they knew what a campaign against Prohibition in the biggest media organization would mean. It must also have concerned President Hoover for good reasons. Typical of a media campaign, Hearst the newspaperman also tried to shape the political agenda by calling upon the president. More a warning than a statement, Hearst's papers held a "war against nation's criminal classes" to be the "paramount problem facing next President"¹²⁴. Hearst, stylizing himself as the *vox populi*, wrote an open letter to Hoover urging him to stand up only for those laws Americans could actually respect¹²⁵. Hoover understood Hearst's power and the damage he could inflict. In their attempts to measure public opinion, Hoover and his staff paid special attention to the Hearst papers. In the administration's confidential collection of newspaper editorials, the editorials of the Hearst press were given a separate letter code¹²⁶. And while Hoover argued that crime was a distinct problem from Prohibition, with the latter not the cause of the former¹²⁷, he conceded that crime might be the country's most serious problem. Hearst was among the factors that quickly put the Hoover administration on the defensive.

Hearst's about-face meant that millions of American newspaper readers were confronted with more critical Prohibition coverage. In light of Hearst's new stance, other papers, up to that point more or less balanced, reluctant to offer sweeping criticisms of Prohibition, soon followed suit and increased their Prohibition coverage. Political debates such as those over the Jones Act, the budget for Prohibition enforcement, gang violence in Chicago and elsewhere, or the shootings of citizens by Prohibition agents in early summer – all these events made big headlines in the first half of 1929. In all five months analyzed for this section of the chapter and in all the newspapers analyzed, attention to Prohibition was perceptibly higher in 1929 than in 1924 or 1928 (see figure 1). At the same time, papers evaluated Prohibition more explicitly and more negatively¹²⁸. As early as April

1929, most editors gathering at the convention of the American Newspaper Publishers' Association in New York intervened in the political debate and demanded a reform of the dry law¹²⁹. Typically, the *Daily News* and the *New York Times*, although skeptical towards Prohibition from the beginning, now increased their Prohibition coverage, especially on the front pages. The *Kansas City Star*, which still supported Prohibition and tried to play down the bad news, printed only one front-page article per three days. But the ongoing politicization and radicalization also led to a higher number of articles in that paper, more so than in 1924 or 1928. Drys as well saw the policy's acceptance eroding rapidly and sensed that the conflict was about to escalate¹³⁰.

In their different ways, both the Anti-Saloon League and the Hoover administration attempted to make the intensifying Prohibition debate synonymous with the question of enforcement. In Prohibitionist rhetoric, a criminal-punitive discourse prevailed, with terms like "law enforcement", "climate of lawlessness", and "dry law" prevalent. One in four articles covering Prohibition in 1929 included the words "law" or "enforce" in the headline. The more the federal government created the image that it tried everything possible to enforce Prohibition and the more Herbert Hoover put the blame on drinking Americans for the climate of lawlessness, the more "law enforcement" became morally and politically charged. This ensured that when more Americans turned against the policy, the link to lawlessness would backfire on Hoover¹³¹. Similarly, the media depicted a stylized conflict between law-abiding citizens and the government, with law enforcement officials becoming notorious in some press accounts. It did not help the dry cause that the media portrayed as turncoats Prohibition officials such as Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who left her post in the Justice Department to work as a lawyer for a company producing a grape substitute for alcohol. In popular and press stereotypes, Prohibition officials no longer appeared as public servants working for the public good but as cold-blooded officials attacking innocent citizens in the search for liquor. By the summer of 1929, millions of Americans seemed to believe that the government and its so-called "snoopers" cared nothing about privacy, sometimes not even about life, an interpretation seldom found in the media in 1924.

The press, eager to dramatize conflicts and to frame these events with catchy war and conflict metaphors, publicized and condemned cases such as the shooting of Mrs. Lillian DeKing in Aurora, Illinois¹³², or of Minnesota father Henry Vitkula, mistakenly thought to have been carrying liquor in his car near the Canadian border. Papers depicted such cases as "prohibition slaying" or "dry killing". Apart from some dry papers such as the *Kansas City Star*, which tried to cover these events with smaller news agency reports only and which euphemistically spoke of

¹²³ Cartoon: Hooch, *CHE*, February 23, 1929.

¹²⁴ WAR AGAINST NATION'S CRIMINAL CLASSES IS PARAMOUNT PROBLEM FACING NEXT PRESIDENT, *CHE*, February 27, 1929.

¹²⁵ 'WE NEED LAWS WE CAN RESPECT', W.R. HEARST REPLIES TO PRESIDENT, *CHE*, April 26, 1929. See also the front page article: HOOVER 'FIRED A BLANK'. William Randolph Hearst criticizes speech on law. Congressmen who vote dry and drink wet in hip pockets are bombarded by the publisher in visit here, *KCS*, April 25, 1929.

¹²⁶ Herbert C. Hoover Archives, "Confidential", Presidential Papers-Press Relations, Boxes 1165-77, quoted in: *Eisinger*, Gauging public opinion in the Hoover White House 656-657. For an analysis of Hoover's strategies to systematically monitor public opinion, cf. also *Brandon Rottinghaus*, Limited to follow: The early public opinion apparatus of the Herbert Hoover White House, in: *American Politics Research* 31/5 (2003) 540-556.

¹²⁷ Front page article: HOOVER DEMANDS RESPECT FOR LAW; CALLS IT NATION'S 'DOMINANT ISSUE' IN SPEECH BEFORE PUBLISHERS HERE. President sees crime rife. Country is unsafest of any civilized land, he asserts. Denies dry law is cause, *NYT*, April 23, 1929.

¹²⁸ *Cashman*, Prohibition 163; *Rose*, American women and the repeal of prohibition 54, 123.

¹²⁹ CHANGES IN DRY LAW ADVOCATED BY PUBLISHERS. 'Either enforce prohibition or modify it!' delegates urge; call crime intolerable, *CHE*, April 29, 1929.

¹³⁰ See, for instance, the editorial: Neither repealed nor modified, *KCS*, July 23, 1929.

¹³¹ *Weiskopf*, Amerikas große Ernüchterung 558-559.

¹³² *O'Levent*, Last call 318-319.

"border tensions"¹³³, most of the press left no doubt that these enforcement methods were excessive and unacceptable and that the federal government had become dangerous to innocent citizens¹³⁴. The sudden attentiveness to these and other so-called "dry killings"¹³⁵, illustrates a pattern well-known in media research. The press now published accounts of seemingly similar scandals almost daily. This attention spiral reinforced the frame of "lawlessness caused by Prohibition". The greater attentiveness to such events itself created a sense that the underlying situation had changed, adding to the momentum of coverage. The *Chicago Herald and Examiner* introduced sections labeled "Latest Prohibition developments" or "245 civilians and U.S. dry agents killed since 1920"¹³⁶, while the *New York Times* started to summarize these events on a separate page. The *Daily News* printed a map that suggested, "The prohibition death front moves South"¹³⁷.

More and more Americans expressed disappointment and frustration with this and perceived a climate of lawlessness associated with Prohibition. In this type of situation, an atmosphere of insecurity encourages messages to take on more clear-cut forms and boundaries to be more rigid¹³⁸. The drys, until now confident to the point of complacency, did not accept that that public opinion had begun to shift significantly only half a year after Hoover's victory and that "in so many ways, 1929 turned out to be a rotten year for the drys"¹³⁹. Drys sensed a conspiracy among the wet press and held people who broke Prohibition laws responsible for organized crime. To set boundaries for the dry side while defending Prohibition, the *Kansas City Star* often exploited historical narratives. Urging the dry camp to stay strong¹⁴⁰ and portraying the dry cause in the light of America's founding

myth, the paper compared the current struggle with the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion. Now the government was facing another whiskey rebellion¹⁴¹, and a stern, rational insistence upon law and order would aid in controlling the excessive and emotional impulses of mankind¹⁴².

On the other side of the issue, wets – including recent converts – had by the summer of 1929 radicalized their own rhetoric and boiled down their arguments into a condensed, standardized attack¹⁴³. Wet critiques associated Prohibition with everything from crime and "disregard for law" to "contempt for law", "lawlessness", "corruption", and "hypocrisy". The policy became a symbol of evil and "danger" for society¹⁴⁴. In terms that could border on conspiracy theories¹⁴⁵, Hoover was depicted as a puppet of the Anti-Saloon League¹⁴⁶. Opponents asserted that the Eighteenth Amendment had been "bought" by the drys in the chaos of the war, while charging that the Anti-Saloon League had blackmailed newspapers to publish Prohibition propaganda¹⁴⁷. The wet press increasingly associated its discourse with images of personal freedom. Drinking took its place alongside war as "normal masculine impulses" and "human necessities", which should not be oppressed by an "essentially feminine and pseudo-religious idea embodied in federal prohibition"¹⁴⁸. Like the drys, the wets also justified their stance based upon history. In a statement directed at Hoover, Hearst even called for a "rebellion" similar to the fight for independence from the king of England¹⁴⁹. In the Hearst papers as well as the *New York Times* or the *Daily News*, editorials as well as news analyses condemned Prohibitionists for fanatically waging a "medieval religious war"¹⁵⁰ against the American people. In the words of the Association against the Prohibition Amendment, the drys had tried to "ram an un-

¹³³ Front page article: BORDER SHOTS STIR. Two attacks by rum patrol officers are subjects of investigation, *KCS* (report by *Associated Press*), June 12, 1929.

¹³⁴ END DRY KILLINGS, FOX URGES HOOVER. Letter says President alone can stop 'assassinations' by federal agents. Cites Minnesota fatality. Moderation League chairman asks whether it is anarchy or revolt when citizens arm, *NYT*, June 12, 1929, front page article: MURDER TRIAL ASKED FOR DRY. WHOLE STATE ENRAGED BY BULLET RULE; AGENT HIDES. Citizens protest manslaughter booking; petition congress; Lowman order inquiry. 'Shotgun reign' by government denounced in House; victim's funeral today, *CHE*, June 12, 1929. See also: DRYs TO CONTINUE IN 'MURDER POLICY'. Only action by Hoover can stop gun play, *DN*, June 13, 1929.

¹³⁵ See, for instance, the cartoon: Hot suspicions – cold facts, *CHE*, June 15, 1929.

¹³⁶ Front page article: DRY KILLINGS ALARM LOWMAN. SECRET EDICT TO AGENTS FORBIDS USE OF SHOTGUNS. Fire only in self-defense, U.S. orders; extreme caution urged; slaying 'accident'. State trial for Virkula killer requested; Hoover confers with enforcement officials, *CHE*, June 18, 1929.

¹³⁷ Front page article: DRY KILLERS DEFY STATE. KILLERS DEFY DRY PROBE. Hoover acts to sift rum death wave. Upstate County roused as U.S. men flout law, *DN*, June 18, 1929.

¹³⁸ Kurt Imhof, Die Krise der Öffentlichkeit. Kommunikation und Medien als Faktoren sozialen Wandels [The crisis of the public sphere. Communication and media as factors of social change] (Frankfurt 2011).

¹³⁹ *Oberent*, Last Call 322.

¹⁴⁰ Editorial: Neither modified nor repealed, *KCS*, July 23, 1929.

¹⁴¹ Editorial: Just another whiskey rebellion, *KCS*, June 19, 1929.

¹⁴² Editorial: War, liquor, and reason, *KCS*, February 22, 1929.

¹⁴³ Kyvig also mentions "standard wet or dry arguments" when describing the highly publicized hearings of the House Judiciary Committee in early 1930. *Kyvig*, Repealing national prohibition 112.

¹⁴⁴ For instance: URGES BAR TO LEAD IN DRY ACT REPEAL. C.H. Davis of Virginia tells lawyers 18th amendment is menace to republic. Presents 13 'charges'. Arraigns it as 'piece of dynamite inserted in foundation of governmental structure', *NYT*, June 14, 1929.

¹⁴⁵ *Clark*, Deliver us from evil 198.

¹⁴⁶ Editorials: Hoover – above hysteria?, *DN*, April 16, 1929, or: Earthquake-maker Wick-ersham, *DN*, July 18, 1929.

¹⁴⁷ For instance the editorial: Guardians of public morals, *NYT*, June 18, 1929.

¹⁴⁸ Editorial: Government by weaklings?, *DN*, January 20, 1929.

¹⁴⁹ "But if the American people had had respect for all laws, good or bad, there would have been no Boston Tea Party to protest against the invasion of rights and liberties of our people; no Declaration of independence to declare liberty and equality as the inalienable rights of man no United States of America to establish liberty and equality as the foundation stones of Republican government; and, in that sad case, no President Hoover, but only a certain Herbert Hoover eminent engineer and a loyal and law-respecting subject of His Majesty King George V." In: WE NEED LAWS WE CAN RESPECT, W.R. HEARST REPLIES TO PRESIDENT, *CHE*, April 26, 1929.

¹⁵⁰ Editorial: Some most embarrassing moments, *DN*, July 22, 1929.

reasonable law down the throats of the majority", as was witnessed by "all this free-and-easy killing"¹⁵¹.

While the debate about Prohibition had always been a struggle over normality and social control, by the summer of 1929, the salience and the intensity of discourse over the issue had dramatically changed. By that summer, the press focused intensely on Prohibition at the expense of other political issues. The dispute meanwhile became radicalized and ever more polarized. Trust in political institutions seemed to sink amid a climate of lawlessness and uncertainty over whether the wets or dries would win in the end. Using Albert O. Hirschman's insights into patterns of social conflict, one could argue that Prohibition emerged as *the* crucial conflict America would have to solve. A divisible conflict of "more or less" transformed into an indivisible, fundamental conflict of "either or"¹⁵². The politicization of the Prohibition issue by Al Smith, Hearst's newspaper campaign, and the perceived climate of lawlessness, further intensified by the press, had set a long-standing conflict off balance, with support for Prohibition dropping with noteworthy speed. The growing number of wets, whose political organization intensified in 1929 with, for example, the founding of the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform, had unfrozen the conflict. Wets realized that there were in fact opportunities to get rid of Prohibition in one way or other. The dwindling number of dries, on the other hand, countered with even more radical measures, adding to this polarization. The quarrel headed for a showdown.

Social theorists argue that these patterns appear when an ongoing but manageable conflict accelerates into a true social and political crisis, a crisis which marks the possible end of a cycle and the end of a model of what society should look like¹⁵³. Likewise, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argued that "external" shocks such as the Great Depression and new business cycles may, of course, "heighten or complicate moods, but the cycle itself rolls on, self-contained, self-sufficient and autonomous"¹⁵⁴. Thus, even before the onset of the Great Depression in late 1929, a political cycle in the United States seemed to roll to an end. If one accepts that economic progress depends, *ceteris paribus*, on clear expectations, predictability, and trust, it might even be worthwhile to analyze not only the effects of the Depression on this socio-political cycle but, conversely, the possible effects of the explosive socio-political climate, triggered by Prohibition, on the economy¹⁵⁵. In this sense, the debate about Prohibition, which had come to dominate political

¹⁵¹ Front page article: REFUSES DEMANDS TO DISARM DRY MEN IN VIEW OF KILLINGS, NYT, June 13, 1929.

¹⁵² Alfred O. Hirschman, Social Conflicts as Pillars of Democratic Market Society, in: Political Theory 22/2 (1994) 203–218.

¹⁵³ Imhof, Krise der Offenlichkeit.

¹⁵⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Cycles of American history (Boston 1999 [1986]) 27.

¹⁵⁵ Hansjörg Siegenthaler, Regelvertrauen, Prosperität und Krisen. Die Ungleichmäßigkeit wirtschaftlicher und sozialer Entwicklung als Ergebnis individuellen Handelns und sozialen Lernens [Basic trust, prosperity and crises. The asymmetry of economic and social development as a result of individual action and social learning] (Tübingen 1993).

communication and invade so many facets of American life¹⁵⁶, looms even larger than historians have usually envisioned.

Summary

Obwohl die Presse die zentrale Arena für die Definition sozialer Probleme und für die Diskussion von Problemlösungen ist, wird ihre Rolle bei der Abschaffung der Prohibition („repeal“) relativ selten und wenig systematisch untersucht. Die Presse ist zudem nicht einfach nur „Spiegel“ für die Ideen und Handlungen (politischer) Akteure, vielmehr fungieren die Besitzer der Zeitungen und die Journalisten selbst als Akteure mit eigenen Interessen und eigenen Logiken der Nachrichtenauswahl und -darstellung. Vor diesem Hintergrund stellt dieser Beitrag eine systematische Analyse der Berichterstattung über die Prohibition in vier verschiedenen Presseititeln im Zeitraum von 1924 bis 1933 vor.

Die Analyse fördert unter anderem entscheidende Konfliktodynamiken zutage: Die nach Al Smiths Wahlkampf von 1928 nun nicht mehr abreißende Politisierung, der resonanzstark postulierte und inszenierte Meinungsumschwung des Presse-Moguls William Randolph Hearst und die von den Medien verstärkte und dramatisierte Darstellung und Vermittlung eines Klimas der Polarisierung und der Gesetzlosigkeit – all dies transformierte den lange Zeit stabilen „Mehr-oder-weniger“-Konflikt über die Prohibition 1929 innerhalb weniger Monate in einen zentralen „Entweder-oder“-Konflikt, der die öffentliche Kommunikation der Vereinigten Staaten dominierte. Vor dem Hintergrund von Sozial- und Konflikttheorien läßt sich dies als Ausdruck einer ausgeprägten Orientierungskrise lesen, die bereits vor der *Great Depression* einsetzte.

¹⁵⁶ Welskopf, Amerikas große Ernüchterung 13–15.

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1890s to 1940s

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